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CONDEMNED

FROM THE DOCK:



JOHN MACLEAN

His famous speech
against
War and Capitalism

FOREWORD

Any introduction to John MacLean's famous speech from the dock, which he made on May 8th 1918 in the High Court in Edinburgh, must, inevitably, be inadequate. But it is fitting in the year of his 50th Commemoration that something should be said about the man himself, and the circumstances surrounding the trial.

The courage and sincerity of John MacLean is beyond question. That will be evident to all who read the speech. He was a man fully convinced that human emancipation was possible only as a result of social revolution. He died one year before Mussolini seized power in Italy, and ten years before Hitler seized power in Germany, and did not witness the crimes of fascism, yet it is clear from his speech that he knew the nature of the capitalist beast. One wonders how the judge and the members of the jury felt when they heard this obviously sincere man denounce capitalism from the dock with the same intensity as when he spoke to workers at his classes and public meetings.

John MacLean was in the dock because he opposed the war and upheld the Russian Revolution as pointing the way forward for the workers of the whole world. He was there at a time when unscrupulous warmongers were accusing Clydeside workers of getting German gold. It was at a time when all who opposed the war were regarded as either cowards or traitors. Despite this atmosphere John MacLean was now speaking with greater confidence than ever before. There was the Russian Revolution and, on top of that, the Clydeside shop stewards were, for the first time, calling for an end to the war. Here was a man who, like revolutionaries throughout the world, had his faith completely restored after the disappointment caused by the collapse of social-democracy at the outbreak of the war.

And here at this point a word or two should be said about the shop stewards and their attitude to the war. No sooner had it started than the Clydeside workers entered a struggle to defend established rights and raise their wages. The first blow was struck at Weir's Cathcart where the men resurrected the pre-war demand for an increase of twopence an hour. J.M. Messer had built up at the Weir factory the only work-shop committee on the Clyde. The men at the Weir works came out on strike and they were followed by the workers in all the engineering works on Clydeside. This struggle gave birth to the Clyde Workers' Committee of which Willie Gallacher was Chairman.

Gallacher, like most of the leading shop stewards, was opposed to the war but he had for a while come under the influence of John Muir, who had won him over to accepting that the war was a fact and that the fight should be within the limits that sprang from that approach. But John MacLean, with whom Gallacher had been associated for many years, had consistently expressed his hostility to the policy of confining the struggle to economic issues. Now at the time of the trial the situation had hardened, and the shop stewards were opposed to the continuance of the war.

Let it be said that Gallacher had the courage of a lion. He was honest, likeable, and popular. The decision of the shop stewards to oppose the war put Gallacher in his element. Scotland has never produced his equal as an industrial leader.

The event that John MacLean found so heartening and which helped to give him confidence took place in January 1918, when a meeting of shop stewards refused to augment the Government's supply of cannon fodder. The Government had introduced a Man-Power Bill with the aim of conscripting young unmarried engineers to take the places of the young men slaughtered on the western front. Sir Auckland Geddes came to Glasgow to win support for the Bill. It was on that occasion that the shop stewards at a mass meeting, in the presence of Sir Auckland, opposed the Bill and called for an end to the war.

The Russian Revolution was declared by John MacLean to be the greatest event in human history but it was not possible for the jury to see it that way. The Revolution was feared and, consequently, denounced by the capitalist press. Czarist generals were waging civil war against the Bolsheviks with the financial backing of the capitalist governments. Again, one wonders how the members of the jury felt when they heard the man in the dock praise Lenin and Trotsky, the two most hated men in the capitalist world. Winston Churchill, whose vocabulary was more than adequate for the ordinary rough and tumble of parliamentary politics, was at pains to find fresh epithets to hurl at Lenin and the other leaders of the Russian Revolution, but here was John MacLean hailing as friends the very men whom Churchill detested.

How could it be otherwise? John MacLean had been made an honorary member of the Petrograd Soviet and appointed Russian Consul for Glasgow. Money sent to him by the Russian Government through Kameney was sequestered by the British Government. Lenin had never heard of him before the outbreak of the first world war, but when he did hear of him he was not slow in recognising him as the most outstanding anti-war fighter in Britain.

Those sitting in judgement on him were probably even more disturbed by what he said about the role of the working class. We can only guess what their feelings were when he said: "The working class, when they rise for their own are more dangerous to capitalists than even the German enemies at your gates." That sentence alone was sufficient to seal his fate. It was in line with his onslaught on capitalism, "...dripping with blood from head to foot."

He stood in the dock knowing full well that he was going to prison for the third time. He spoke as a man with a serious message to put forward and determined to do it. He stood there in the same pose as he always stood when speaking at classes or public meetings, his hands slightly in front of his body with palm facing palm, as if he were describing the dimensions of something or other. He showed vigour, but was not flamboyant. That was how he addressed his new audience in the High Court, Edinburgh. The members of that audience had never heard anything like it before.

He talked about strikes, politics, war and revolution. The members of the jury were left in no doubt regarding his opinions. He predicted another war arising from the prevailing conflict of interests between the great powers. He could not have foreseen the rise of Hitler and other events that led to new rivalries, and new alliances, yet he was correct in his rejection of the claim that the first world war was "the war to end war".

It was inevitable that he would be sent to prison. The sentence was one of five years imprisonment. The project he started, of setting up a Scottish Labour College had to be pursued in his absence. The war ended while he was in prison, and a general election was fixed to take place in December of that year. John MacLean was the official Labour candidate for Gorbals. His election campaign was conducted by Willie Gallacher as proxy candidate. Never since has there been an election campaign like it. The demand for the release of the great revolutionary leader was raised in every other part of Clydeside. He was released one week before polling day.

This re-print of the speech will serve a useful purpose if the reader realises that it is John MacLean speaking to him. It is about the class struggle — war — revolution. When the prisoner called from the dock: "Keep it going, boys, keep it going!" he was calling to us. John MacLean died within five years from his release from prison. He was twice again sent to prison within that time.

A great feeling prevailed in 1918. The revolution seemed to be just 'round the corner'. We have not yet reached that corner, but we are on the way. The proletariat will justify the hopes and vision of John MacLean. They will usher in the new society.

HARRY McSHANE

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